

Saving Britney:

An analysis of Britney Spears's *Us Weekly* covers from years 2006-2008

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how the covers of the American celebrity and entertainment magazine *Us Weekly* portray singer Britney Spears. The objective of this study is to find out whether the portrayal of Spears changes throughout the years and whether this portrayal is rooted in sexism. The data consists of 26 magazine covers from years 2006-2008. Spears is included in every cover in the main image or mentioned in the headlines.

Approaches of multimodal discourse analysis and feminist theory were utilized in the analysis of the materials. Multimodal discourse analysis was used to examine the headlines and the photographs on the covers, as well as the relations between the texts and the photographs. Feminist theory was used to examine whether sexism shaped the headlines or imagery in the covers.

The study found that Spears's image changed multiple times throughout the years. At best Spears's image changed a few times in a year, for example, in the beginning of 2006 Spears was portrayed as a motherly figure, but this portrayal was flipped upside down in the last months of the same year.

## **Tiivistelmä**

Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää millaisen kuvan amerikkalainen viihdelehti *Us Weekly* antaa kansissaan laulaja Britney Spearsista. Tutkielman on tarkoituksena selvittää muuttuuko lehden antama kuva Spearsista vuosien varrella ja pohjautuuko kuva seksismiin. Tutkimusmateriaali koostuu 26 lehdenkannesta vuosilta 2006-2008. Näissä kansissa Spears on joko mainittu otsikossa tai hän on kannen pääkuvassa.

Tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin multimodaalista diskurssianalyysiä, jonka avulla analysoitiin tekstiä ja kuvia, sekä niiden välisiä suhteita. Lisäksi analyysissä käytettiin feminististä teoriaa, jonka avulla selvitettiin kuvien ja tekstien mahdollisia seksistisiä teemoja.

Tutkimuksessa selvisi, että *Us Weeklyn* antama kuva Spearsista muuttui vuosien varrella. Spearsin kuva saattoi muuttua vuoden aikana jopa muutamaan otteeseen, sillä esimerkiksi lehden alkuvuonna 2006 antama kuva Spearsista hyvänä ja suojelevana äitinä muuttui päinvastaiseksi saman vuoden lopulla.

## Table of contents

### Abstract

1. Introduction.....	1
2. On gossip .....	3
3. Data.....	5
4. Theoretical and methodological framework .....	6
4.1. Feminist (content) analysis .....	6
4.2. Multimodal discourse analysis.....	7
5. Analysis and findings.....	8
5.1. 2006: from a dedicated mother to a party girl.....	8
5.2. 2007: “sick!” and a bad mother.....	14
5.3. 2008: twisted childhood and serious mental illness.....	21
6. Conclusion .....	26

## 1. Introduction

The fascination over celebrities and their lives seems to be endless: today millions of people watch *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* to see what everyday life looks like in the Kardashian household. Celebrity bloggers, such as Perez Hilton, earn their money writing celebrity gossip. Just googling the name of a celebrity – let us take singer Lady Gaga as an example –, generates well over 192 million hits on Google.

McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002) argue that the fascination over celebrities is in our nature as all information about surrounding fellow humans has been evolutionally important, thus making anyone we know so many details of seem like they are of great importance to us. If we tune into *E! Channel* to watch the life of the Kardashians every week, we might see them more often than we see our relatives. Reading exposés of celebrities from gossip magazines gives us private information about their lives as if they were our friends. Getting intimate glimpses of celebrities' everyday life makes us feel connected to them – and most importantly, makes us feel like we actually know them.

Britney Spears rose to fame with her debut single *...Baby One More Time* in 1998 (Deep Dive, 2020). The 16-year-old star previously known from Disney's *The All New Mickey Mouse Club*, in which she starred with the likes of Justin Timberlake and Christina Aguilera, had just become a worldwide sensation, her debut single quickly becoming one of the best-selling singles of all time (Deep Dive, 2020). Following a successful debut, Spears went onto releasing her first album in 1999 (Deep Dive, 2020). The album named after the now infamous *...Baby One More Time* reached number one in 15 countries and received Grammy nominations (Deep Dive, 2020). Spears's success did not end with *...Baby One More Time*, though. In May 2000 Spears released her sophomore album *Oops!... I Did It Again* to commercial success (Deep Dive, 2020). In the coming years she would go onto releasing hits such as *I'm A Slave 4 U*, *Stronger* and *Toxic* (Deep Dive, 2020).

Starring her first show only at the age of 12 and becoming a worldwide pop sensation at 16 has made Spears live most of her life in the public eye. The line between her personal and professional life has always been blurry and even at the beginning of her career, Spears was a frequent sight on tabloid covers. Most parts of her personal life have made headlines, including the 2001 speculations about her virginity, the 2004 break-up with ex-Disney co-star Timberlake and most famously the 2007 mental breakdown.

This thesis will examine the covers of the American celebrity and entertainment magazine *Us Weekly* that have Spears in the main image and in the headlines. The 26 covers examined are from years 2006-2008. The aim of this thesis is to find out the way *Us Weekly* portrays Spears before, during and after the highly publicized ‘mental breakdown’. By using a feminist theoretical framework, I will analyze how, in one hand, sexism shapes the headlines and imagery in the covers, and on the other hand, the covers reproduce sexism. Multimodal discourse analysis will be used to study the texts and imagery in the covers, as well as the relations between the two.

In the following section I will briefly talk about gossip and its significance for humans. In section 3 I will introduce the data. Section 4 will introduce the theoretical and methodological framework of this study, and section 5 will include the analysis of the materials. Section 6 is reserved for discussion and conclusion.

## 2. On gossip

Though gossip is stereotypically seen as a female-specific trait, multiple studies suggest that gossiping is a universal phenomenon due to its importance in acquiring information about others (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002) mention that gossiping has been a part of human nature for thousands of years: it has been used as a way to determine whether someone in a group was trustworthy or not, and it could have been used as a way to remind group members of the group's social norms and cultural values. McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002) describe gossip as an "indirect and nonthreatening" way to acquire social-comparison information (p. 1064).

Gossip can also be used as guidance because comparing one's life with those of others can give oneself increased feelings of self-worth and can even help with decision-making (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). In discussing celebrity gossip, Wilson (2010) suggests that some people turn to gossip magazines to feel superior to the stars:

"My friends and I look at them to laugh at them. ... Our lives seem pretty good by comparison. We're not going to rehab like Lindsay." (Deveny & Kelley, 2007, p. 46, as cited in Wilson, 2010, p. 30).

The relationship between the readers and the celebrities written about in today's gossip magazines is very different from the relationship between those of earlier gossip magazines, the fan magazines of the early decades of cinema, Wilson (2010) argues. These fan magazines, such as *Photoplay* and *Modern Screen*, offered "readers intimate glimpses into 'real' lives and 'true' feelings of Hollywood luminaries" (Wilson, 2010, p. 26). According to Wilson (2010), while fan magazines relied on a cozy relationship between the fans and the film stars, today's tabloids position the readers to judge the actions of the stars.

Representations of stars in tabloids do not provide a consistent image of the star. Wilson (2020) discusses the example of actress Angelina Jolie whose portrayal on tabloids has shifted from a "happy homemaker" to a "neglectful mother", and from a "model humanitarian" to a "manipulative self-promoter" (p. 28).

The popularity of tabloids rose in the 2000s. Many tabloids, including *Us Weekly*, saw a rise in their sales and the median household income of their readers, meaning they were now reaching "younger and hipper" readers (Wilson, 2020, p. 25). The image of tabloid readers was changing from poor and uneducated to young, fashionable youngsters with good income,

thus dissociating itself from “the connotations of tabloid trash” (Wilson, 2020, p. 25). The rising popularity of tabloids of course meant that new opportunities were open for magazines such as *Us Weekly*.

### 3. Data

*Us Weekly* is a weekly American celebrity and entertainment magazine. It was owned by Wenner Media when the covers examined in this thesis were printed in 2006-2008 (Ember, 2017). The topics in *Us Weekly* are said to be ranging from fashion trends to celebrity gossip. The data of the present study consists of 26 covers. Spears is in every cover either in the main image or mentioned in the headlines. The main image is the biggest image on the cover. The headlines are referred to as “the most important stories in newspapers”, and are the title of the newspaper, usually printed in large letters (Macmillan dictionary).

The data will be divided into three subsections by the years that the covers were released in. The data will be analyzed chronologically and will include some of the covers as examples. The rest of the covers can be accessed on [backissues.com](http://backissues.com), a website specialized in selling old numbers of magazines.

In 2006 Spears appeared on the cover of *Us Weekly* 10 times. The year 2007 has the most covers as there are 12 of them. In 2008 there are only 4 covers.



## **4. Theoretical and methodological framework**

In this section I will introduce the theoretical framework used in analyzing the materials. In section 3.1, I will briefly introduce feminist content analysis and, in section 3.2, multimodal discourse analysis.

### **4.1. Feminist (content) analysis**

Trier-Bieniek (2015) states that “the juxtaposition of feminist theory and popular culture has an inevitable impact on the consumption of culture mainly because popular culture has the power to put up a mirror to our lives and show connections between media, socialization and identity” (p. 14). Studying popular culture, which Trier-Bieniek (2015) defines as being easily accessible and consumable to the masses, could help unveil and recognize the power structures in our society. Trier-Bieniek (2015) also mentions the views of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who find pop culture to work “to support the interests of those in power” (p. 14).

Similarly to Trier-Bieniek (2015), Leavy (2007) states that “by investigating culture in general, and popular culture more specifically, dominant narratives, images, ideas and stereotyped representations can be exposed and challenged” (p. 224). Popular culture has a power to expose us to sexist imagery and messages without us even noticing as a lot of people tend to disregard popular culture as entertainment only. Leavy (2007) argues that “the texts and objects that groups of humans produce are embedded with larger ideas those groups have, ..., such as ideas about sex and gender” (p. 229)

Feminist content analysis studies noninteractive and preexisting data to identify social norms (Leavy 2007). This kind of content analysis could involve photographs, text, magazines, or movies or, as in the case of the present thesis, tabloid covers. Leavy (2007) states that content analysis was developed “out of the assumption that we can learn about our society by interrogating the material items produced within culture” (p. 229), thus making popular culture a significant object of study for investigating the norms and values of society.

Leavy (2007) states that when conducting feminist analysis researchers tend to ask different research questions. These kind of research questions can include, but are not limited to,

asking what the text tells us about how women and men are valued and whose point of view is represented in the media (Leavy, 2007).

#### **4.2. Multimodal discourse analysis**

Because of the nature of the data, multimodal discourse analysis will also be adopted in the present study. O'Halloray (2011) defines multimodal discourse analysis, MDA for short, as combining the study of language with the study of other semiotic resources, such as images. Therefore, MDA will be used to analyze the texts and the photographs on the tabloid covers, as well as the relations between the texts and photographs.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that visual structures realize meanings the same way that linguistic structures do. Visual communication is said to express meanings structured by cultures in society, thus making visual structures hold the same power to mirror society's values as language does (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

While it is said that visual structures and verbal texts can overlap, this is not always the case as there can also be instances where language cannot be realized in images and vice versa (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In the context of tabloid magazines this could also be intentional: the photographs used on the covers do not always reflect the contents of the text, because tabloid covers are first and foremost meant to grab the viewer's attention.

The reliability of messages is further discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen. They refer to the term *modality* as "the truth value or credibility of (linguistically realized) statements about the world (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 155). The concept of modality is said to be essential when it comes to visual communication, as visuals are said to be able to "represent people ... as though they are real, as though they exist in this way" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 156). Modality judgements are then said to depend on what the social group, for whom the representation is intended, consider what is real (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The present study examines whether the photographs on the cover are used truthfully or if they are manipulated - in the age of photoshop it is important to remain critical of photographs as they could have been manipulated afterwards.

## 5. Analysis and findings

This section includes the analysis of the data and the findings. The data is divided into three subsections by the years the covers were released in and the data is analyzed chronologically.

### 5.1. 2006: from a dedicated mother to a party girl

In 2006 Spears appeared on the cover of *Us Weekly* on 10 separate occasions. The beginning of the year is characterized by her “stormy marriage” with husband, dancer Kevin Federline (figure 1). Federline and Spears started dating in 2004 and got married on the same year (Deep Dive, 2020). The couple had their first son in September 2005 and their second son in September 2006 (Deep Dive, 2020).

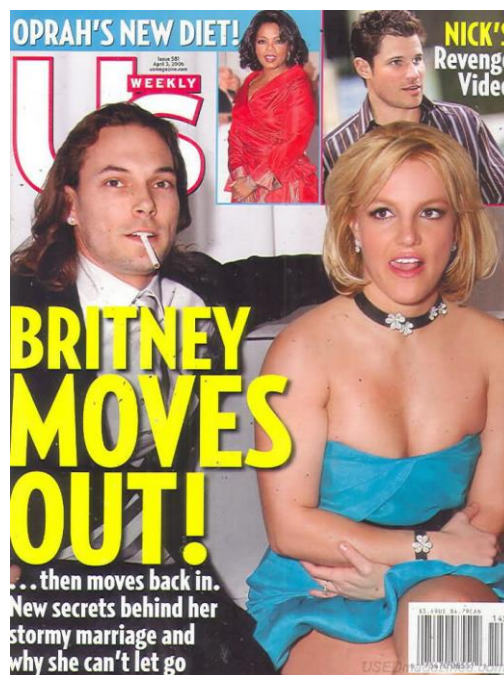


Figure 1. Us Weekly, April 3.

The first cover of the year shows the couple sitting next to each other with a cigarette hanging from Federline’s mouth and Spears with an uncomfortable expression on her face, like she is in the middle of talking (figure 1). The headline reads “Britney moves out!” with the subheading continuing “...then moves back in. New secrets behind her stormy marriage and why she can’t let go.”

The photograph portrays Spears in a very different light from her husband. Federline is shown to be sitting in a relaxed position, looking straight at the camera with a hint of a smile on his lips. Spears is seen sitting with her hands tightly on her body, an uncomfortable expression on her face, looking away from the camera. While Federline is shown to be confident, Spears is shown to make herself seem as small as possible. The text then further reinforces the image of Spears being the more insecure one in the relationship: the text portrays Spears as an indecisive character, even weak for not being able to let go of Federline.

The next cover from May 22 shows Spears together with her baby, yet the headlines are about her marriage. Spears is said to “want out” from the relationship with Federline and how the current pregnancy has her “trapped”. This gives the impression of an unhappy, unstable relationship between the two. A similar theme is present in the covers from June 19 and November 20 (figures 2 and 3).

In the May 29 cover Spears and Federline are seen posing for a photo, both smiling. The headlines, yet again, are focused on the trouble between the couple. Although at the time of the cover Spears was continuously accused of putting their child at risk (Deep Dive, 2020), the cover only acknowledges this with a “plus: Brit puts baby in danger again”. The focus is not on Spears or the child, but on how much money it would cost for Spears to leave Federline and how much Federline is making at the moment. Spears is the financial boss whom Federline is benefiting from. While in figure 1 it could be said Spears is dependent on Federline, hence her not being able to “let go”, the representation is flipped upside down with Federline being dependent on Spears’s money.

The cover from July 3 follows the previous cover thematically as again, a happy photo of the couple is chosen. This time Spears and Federline are shown to be playing with their son on the beach, both of them smiling. If it were not for the headlines, one would not assume this is a couple on the verge of turmoil. The headline titles this as “Kevin’s last chance” as “[Britney] struggles to save her family”. There is an apparent conflict between the text and image. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) state that there is always a reason behind why a specific photograph was chosen. The producer of *Us Weekly* could have chosen a photo such as the one in figure 1 in which the couple is seen sitting on the opposite edges of the cover, Spears’s body language making it seem like she is trying to get as far away as Federline as

possible, while Federline's arm is still around her. It is the same case in the May 29 cover where the couple is shown to pose for a photo happily, yet the text is about their troubles.

The July 3 cover also puts the pressure of saving the family to Spears. While she is also made out to be the victim of "Kevin's lies" (figure 2), she is also the only one who could save "her family". By calling it "her" family and not "their" family, Spears is made out to be the head of the family, a role that is usually reserved for the male counterpart. The cover also mentions that a "Christian life coach helps Britney to forgive". It is not Federline's responsibility to change his ways, but Spears's responsibility to forgive him his errors.



Figures 2 and 3. Us Weekly, June 19 and November 20.

Figure 3, the cover from November 20, is visually almost identical to figure 2, the June 19 cover. The November 20 headline is about Spears storming out after what the subheading calls "a vicious fight". The rest of the subheading reads: "Brit in tears. Separate hotels. How much more can the new mom take from Kevin?" (figure 3).

Spears's sad expression in both figures 2 and 3 combined with the texts still portrays Spears as a victim of Federline's: first Federline was a liar, but now he is also making the new mother cry. The way Spears is pictured holding her baby, and the text mentioning her being a "new mom" is to garner sympathy for Spears. While Federline is made out to be an insensitive person, Spears is made out to be the motherly, warm figure that protects the children by keeping them close. It could even be argued that the photographs make it seem

like Spears is taking the children away from Federline for good, going back “to family and her faith for strength” (figure 2).

Women are traditionally seen as the primary caretakers of the family, and this image is further perpetuated by the covers. It can be argued that these covers reinforce the gendered stereotypes: Spears is an emotional motherly figure and Federline is portrayed as an aggressor from whom Spears must protect her children from.

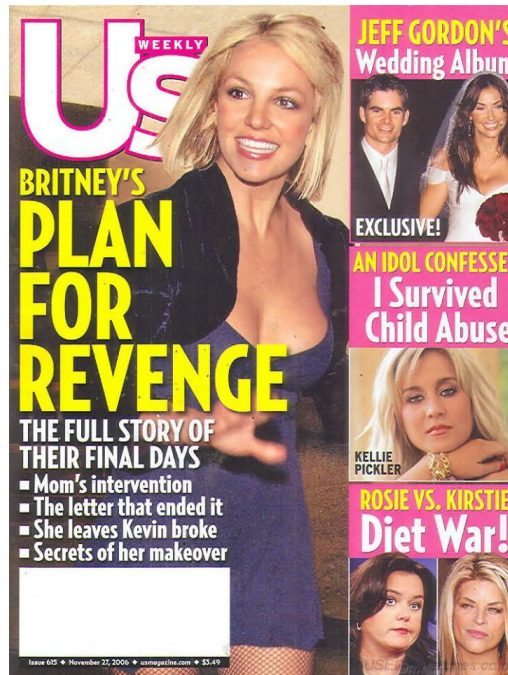


Figure 4. Us Weekly, November 27.

A week later in the November 27 cover Spears is pictured in blond hair with a “plan for revenge” (figure 4). Figure 4 shows the first cover that has Spears alone in the photograph as in previous covers she was accompanied by either Federline or one of her children. Spears is seemingly in a hurry but smiling. No eye contact is made with the camera. Spears had recently filed for divorce from Federline and was seeking the custody of their children (Deep Dive, 2020).

This is the first shift in Spears’s image in 2006. Despite her recent divorce with Federline, Spears is shown to be happy and smiling. Between her happiness, the “plan for revenge” and the May 22 cover where it is revealed that Spears would have left Federline earlier if it were not for the pregnancy, *Us Weekly* makes Spears look like a conniving character. She is smiling as she is “[leaving] Kevin broke”, leaving him with nothing as she takes his children and money from him.



The thought that there is a specific way a mother should look like, albeit being rooted in sexism, is still prevalent in media. Many seem to hold the thought that mothers should not care about their appearance and not walk around in revealing clothing like Spears, who had given birth two months earlier, does in the photograph. Although Spears has been seen in revealing clothing before per figure 1, this is the first time she is shown in revealing clothing post-partum. This could imply that *Us Weekly* strays away from portraying Spears as a motherly figure.



Figure 5. *Us Weekly*, December 11.

In the cover from December 11 (figure 5), Spears is yet again pictured holding her baby, but this time she is also seen with socialite Paris Hilton. The headline calls Hilton “Brit’s new trouble” and her “dangerous new best friend”. After her divorce from Federline, Spears was frequently seen going out with Hilton (Deep Dive, 2020).

The way the cover is assembled gives readers the impression that Spears takes her children with her when she goes out with Hilton. Paired with the subheading that raises concern for her children due to her “wild sleepovers [and] all-night partying”, *Us Weekly* makes readers question Spears’s parenting skills. It also raises concern about Spears’s judgement as she has befriended a “troubling” character like Hilton.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that the credibility of newspapers rests on the knowledge that photographs do not lie. However, they go onto suggest that “while the camera

does not lie ... those who use it and its images can do” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 159). The cover suggests that Spears’s children are in danger first by making it seem like they are present during Spears’s and Hilton’s wild parties, and second, by being in the company of the “dangerous” and “troubling” Hilton.

The last cover of 2006, published on 18<sup>th</sup> of December, is titled “saving Britney”. Spears’s relationship and partying with Hilton is mentioned again, but this time it is brought up by her parents. Spears’s parents are said to be “[begging for Spears] to stop party binge with Paris Hilton as she risks her career and the custody of her kids”. The concerns brought up in the December 11 cover (figure 5) of Spears “risking everything” seem to be coming true, as Hilton’s dangerous way of living has corrupted her.

The photograph is a closeup of Spears and she is seen smiling, dolled up for what the cover makes it seem like another party with Hilton. Spears is wearing more makeup than in any of the other covers. Although the text makes it seem like Spears is spiraling out of control and is only partying, Spears looks happy in the picture – this is yet another case where the image does not match the text. Even though the text makes it seem like she needs saving, the photograph does not indicate that there would be any need for that.

What is common in all the covers is that Spears never looks directly at the camera, except for the May 29 cover. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that if no eye contact is made “the viewer’s role is that of an invisible onlooker” (p. 119). In this case Spears is represented as an “item of information” as though she was a “specimen in a display case” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 119). In the first cover (figure 1), Federline makes eye contact with the camera and, unlike Spears, establishes a contact with the viewer (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

All of the covers, except for an October 30 cover that idolized her quick weight loss after giving birth, focus on Spears’s relationships in some way. First, it was her trouble with husband Federline. When the “drama” with Federline had been settled, *Us Weekly* turned to Spears’s relationship with Hilton. Another relationship the covers focused on was her relationship with her children: Spears went from protecting her children from Federline to putting them to danger with Hilton.



## 5.2. 2007: “sick!” and a bad mother

In 2007 Spears was in the cover of *Us Weekly* 12 times. The first cover of 2007 introduces the readers to Spears’s new boyfriend, model Isaac Cohen (figure 6). The cover sees the couple pose for a photograph. Spears has a wide smile on her face and looks straight at the camera. She leans onto Cohen, making the photograph have a stark contrast to the one in figure 1. Although Spears seems happy in the photograph the text questions whether her happiness will last. The subheadings read Spears “rushes into love” and questions whether she can trust him. “[Rushing] into love” suggests that Spears is in a hurry to replace Federline and that maybe this decision has not been thought through.



Figure 6. *Us Weekly*, January 29.

Spears is seen posing in what could be described as a girly manner. She seems almost childlike leaning into Cohen, both of her hands on her lap. The childlikeness of Spears’s is further endorsed by the subheading in which Spears describes her new boyfriend to be “so hot”. The shallow comment is used to emphasize Spears’s naivete and to suggest that she is only with him for his looks, him being a model after all.

Spears's judgement is brought up again as the cover questions whether Spears can trust Cohen or not. Although it is said that Cohen is "already changing diapers", meaning he could be in a committed relationship with Spears, the cover questions the relationship.

Although *Us Weekly* has called Spears with the nickname "Brit" on previous occasions, in a cover like figure 6 it could be argued that it was a conscious choice. In addition to making Spears seem like a childish, shallow girl instead of a mother of two, she is not referred to with her full name, but with a nickname.

In the February 26 cover Spears is pictured with a sad expression on her face. The photograph is a closeup of her face. A photograph of two of her exes, Federline and Timberlake, is edited on the right side of her. In the photograph the men are seen to be talking to each other and laughing. The headline reads "Justin hurts Britney again", the subheading elaborating that "Justin and Kevin are caught making fun of [Spears]".

Spears and Timberlake dated from 1999 to 2002. The couple went through a very public breakup, partly because of Timberlake's song *Cry Me a River*. Written about his relationship with Spears, the music video included a Spears look-a-like who was shown to be cheating on Timberlake (Deep Dive, 2020).

The cover makes it seem like Federline and Timberlake are laughing at Spears in the picture. Paired with Spears's sad expression, it almost looks like Spears was there and overheard the two of them making fun of her. Federline and Timberlake are also said to be "new pals", bonding over their ex-girlfriend, although it is likely that the two knew each other already as Federline was a back-up dancer for Timberlake in the early 2000s.

Spears's now ended relationship with Cohen is also brought up as Cohen reveals Spears to be "desperately sad", because her "dreams to get Justin back are destroyed". The claim of wanting Timberlake back is never brought up by Spears herself. The worries presented in the January 29 cover (figure 6) of Spears not being able to trust Cohen came true as well, as Cohen is now telling the tabloid information about Spears's private life.

Although Spears is said to be "desperately sad", the cover does not offer her any sympathy, but fuels her sadness by making it seem like all her ex-boyfriends are laughing at her behind her back.



Figure 7. Us Weekly, March 5.

The March 5 cover (figure 7) includes one of the most famous photographs of the time: Spears shaving her head in a Californian hair salon. Although the salon was closed at the time and only open for Spears, the paparazzi stationed outside managed to capture multiple photographs of the incident (Deep Dive, 2020). Accompanied with the “help me” headline, the cover is sure to grab readers’ attention.

The subheadings mention insiders and ex-staffers who, much like Cohen (shown in figure 6), reveal information about Spears’s private life to the tabloid. The mention of Spears’s “loneliness, self-hatred and drug use” with the photograph make it seem like Spears is officially spiraling out of control – something *Us Weekly* has predicted in previous covers.

The drug use is mentioned again in a March 26 cover with the headline “Hollywood’s drug problem”. Spears shares the cover with actress Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton. The cover suggests that Spears is one of the stars whose lives “are getting ruined by drugs”. The cover makes it seem like all of Spears’s problems are due to her drug use, thus belittling the possible issues with mental health. It is also worth noting that the cover only includes female celebrities.

Although the March 5 cover (figure 7) makes Spears’s hair shaving incident seem like a cry for help, a result of hitting rock bottom due to “drug use” and “partying”, in reality, it could have been a way for Spears to regain control in at least one part of her life. When asked why

Spears shaved her hair, she mentioned how sick she was of people touching her and her hair (Deep Dive, 2020).

The March 5 cover (figure 7) also mentions Spears's children and includes a photograph of one of them. The photograph shows the child looking distraught. The question “who has the babies” is meant to make the readers worry about the children's well-being again, a recurring theme in the *Us Weekly* covers. Although at this point the tabloid has not given a reliable image of either of the parents, this time the cover worries what will happen to the children if they are with Spears.



Figures 8 and 9: *Us Weekly*, March 12 and June 25.

Figures 8 and 9 show Spears first with Federline (March 12 cover) and then with her mother Lynne Spears (June 25 cover). In Figure 8 Spears is shown to have her arms on Federline's shoulders. The couple is smiling and posing for a photograph. Figure 9 is apparently an older photograph of Spears with her mother, showing the two smiling and posing for a photograph.

Both covers offer a new point of view to Spears's situation. The March 12 cover (figure 8) tells "[Federline]'s side of the story" and June 25 cover (figure 9) "her mother's side of the story". A common theme in these two and a number of previous covers is that Spears's own voice is left out completely, but her ex-partners, ex-staff members and family members are given a platform to talk about Spears's private life. Spears is shown to be slowly losing control of her own image as all the power is given to other people.

The photographs in the two covers in figures 8 and 9 are chosen to be photographs of Spears being close with the one telling their side of the story. In the March 12 cover (figure 8), despite their recent divorce, Spears is shown to be close to Federline, smiling happily in the picture. The photograph with her mother in the June 25 cover (figure 9) shows the two physically close to each other, their heads together. The photographs make the readers trust the word of these two: because they are shown to be physically close to Spears in the photographs, they must be emotionally close to her too, and thus they are reliable narrators of Spears's life and troubles.

The March 12 cover (figure 8) also marks the shift in Federline's image. While in 2007 Spears was the one protecting the children, now Federline is said to be "[protecting] their kids".



Figure 10: Us Weekly, August 13.

In the cover from August 13 (figure 10) Spears is not in the main photograph but added as a side photograph in the way her children have been used before. The main photograph is of her children. A similar template is used in a cover from October 1.

The cover makes it seem like Spears's sons are asking for help, one of the children looking distraught and sad. The subheading mentions "soda in baby bottles, ..., nighttime cries for Daddy's love" as if the children were the ones talking. Although other covers, when presenting troubles in Spears's household, mention "ex-staffers" or "nannies" as the ones

who have revealed this information, the August 13 cover (figure 10) does not mention anyone, and instead leaves the source of the statements open.

Federline's portrayal as the sensible parent is continued as he is said to be "battling for Sean and Jayden", their children, as Spears is said to be growing "more dangerous". While Federline is presented as the parent who takes care of the children, the photograph of Spears in the August 13 cover (figure 10), shows Spears dancing on a stripper pole in revealing clothing. The sexual nature of the photograph is further strengthened by the subheading's mention of "mommy's many men", making it seem like Spears is going from man to man, possibly endangering her children by bringing strange men home. The cover does not elaborate on how Spears is growing more dangerous, but makes it seem like it has something to do with her dancing on the stripper pole.

The August 20 cover is titled "my twisted night with Brit". The main photograph is of Spears in a pool with an unknown man, who seems to be the one who experienced the "twisted night" with Spears. Spears is said to have been "topless, drunk and lonely" as she seduced "a college student in a hotel pool". Like in the previous cover, in this one Spears's sexuality is used to vilify her.

While Spears is said to be partying with college students, Federline is said to be "[rushing] to save his boys". A picture of their son, Jayden, is also included on the cover with the text below stating that he was still out at 10:30pm. The cover now refers to the children as "his" boys – as in Federline's boys. Spears is no longer the head of the family, but Federline is. Much like in the December 18 cover in 2006 (figure 5), the August 20 cover in 2007 makes it seem like Spears is yet again taking her children with her when she goes to parties.

The October 1 cover is similar to the August 13 cover (figure 10). The main photograph shows one of Spears's children walking, with a photograph of Spears added onto the side. In the photograph Spears is wearing sunglasses, trying to hide her face from the photographer. The cover is titled "Britney's darkest hour: mommy's crying", as she had just lost custody battle to Federline (Deep Dive, 2020). The children are said to have had "heartbreaking birthdays", and to "'take days' to recover from harrowing visits with Mom".





Figure 21: Us Weekly, November 19.

The November 19 cover (figure 11) shows Spears in a revealing outfit. Wearing a bright pink zebra printed outfit and a feather boa, with the cover talking about trick-or-treating, it could be assumed that the photograph is from a Halloween party and is in no way what Spears wears on the regular.

The headline is short and only says “sick!”. The cover makes it seem like a parenting coach called Spears sick, but with the missing quotation marks it is unclear whether this is the parenting coach’s opinion or *Us Weekly*’s. The identity of the parenting coach is also left unclear: the cover does not mention their name or relationship with Spears. Whether this is Spears’s parenting coach or not is left unknown.

The November 19 cover (figure 11) mentions Spears’s children again, this time the subheading telling the readers that Spears “leaves boys in car while shopping; denies them trick-or-treating”. As previous covers have talked about Spears being “drunk with the children” (October 1 cover) and putting them in danger with her “many men”, denying the children trick-or-treating seems like a small offense. As the cover was released close to Halloween, however, this could have been used as a way to make the readers pity the children even more. In addition to neglecting her children in every other way, Spears is now denying the children such small and simple things, too.

The subheading also reads “mental illness signs worsen”. Although her worsening mental health has been discussed on many occasions (e.g. the February 26 cover mentions her being

“desperately sad” and the March 5 cover, shown in figure 7, mentions her loneliness and self-hatred), *Us Weekly* continues to exploit her struggles in the covers. Spears is presented more as a laughingstock or a “dumpster fire” for people to observe, than an actual, struggling human being.

Even though Spears has been seen performing in revealing clothing, covers such as those shown in figures 10 and 11 seem to use Spears’s revealing outfits as shock material, to emphasize her mental health issues. The covers use her choices of outfit and the insinuations of sexual behavior as a way to shame her. It could be argued that if Spears were to get on stage wearing either of the outfits it would not be used against her, thus making female sexuality only acceptable when its profitable and geared towards men. Spears’s sexuality is also used as a way to emphasize her failure as a mother. When covers mention her “many men”, or her “seducing college students” her children are also always mentioned or even included on the covers.

2007 also marked a shift in the images of Spears and Federline. While in 2006 Spears was seen as the protective, motherly figure of the family, she is now seen as an unstable, vulgar party girl. *Us Weekly* has repeatedly made Federline seem like the sensible parent and the head of the family who is doing his best in saving “his” children from Spears, although in 2006 he was made out to be the irresponsible one.

None of the covers mention Spears’s album *Blackout*, which she released on October 25. *Blackout* was Spears’s first album in four years. Despite not having a lot of promotion, the album received some of the best reviews in Spears’s career (Deep Dive, 2020). The album includes tracks like *Piece of Me*, in which Spears describes her battles with the media and her image and how everything she does ends up in magazines.

### **5.3. 2008: twisted childhood and serious mental illness**

2008 has the least amount of covers as there are only 4 of them. In the first cover of the year, the January 7 cover, Spears is seen with her little sister Jamie Lynn Spears. Spears is shown to be hugging her little sister who has a sad expression on her face. Although Spears is seen smiling in the cover, her eyes look teary. Spears looks straight at the camera while her sister



does not. The way Spears is shown to be hugging her sister makes her look like a protective character.

The headline reads “destroyed by mama”, with an addition of “shame on Lynne Spears”. Responsibility of Spears’s struggles is suddenly directed towards her mother. A similar theme of uncovering Spears’s past and her family’s struggles is present in a December 3 cover from 2007, titled “[Spears’s] twisted childhood”. The December 3 cover features a photograph of Spears as a child and the subheadings describe various struggles of her childhood such as “grandma’s suicide, family bankruptcy, sex at 14, dad’s addiction”. A lot of Spears’s struggles are made out to have something to do with her family as the December 3 cover mentions “how the child star’s secret demons are destroying her”.

The covers divert the attention from media’s exploitation of Spears to her family. Media and magazines, which Spears has stated to be “painting a twisted image of her” (Deep Dive, 2020), are not made responsible. Tabloids do not use her mental health issues to sell numbers, but it is Spears’s mother who “sees kids as a piggy bank”. *Us Weekly* does not take any responsibility for exploiting Spears’s struggles but makes it seem like all of Spears’s problems stem from her childhood and her family. Even though the December 3, 2007 cover mentions Spears’s father’s struggles with addiction, the January 7, 2008 cover seems to put all responsibility to her mother. This further perpetuates the idea that women are responsible for their children, and fathers are not.

The covers do not laugh at Spears but for the first time seem to offer pity for her. In the December 3, 2007 and January 7, 2008 covers her struggles are taken seriously.



Figure 12: Us Weekly, January 21.

The January 21 cover (figure 12) includes a photograph of Spears driving a car. She has an angry expression on her face, like she is in the middle of shouting. The headline titles Spears as a “time bomb”, setting aside all previous pity. The cover says the magazine offers “new details on that night”, most likely referring to an incident where Spears refused to turn the children over to Federline and locked herself in a bathroom with her younger child Jayden (Deep Dive, 2020). The cover describes the event as follows: “Jayden’s terror, Kevin’s desperate call to Lynne, inside the locked bathroom”. Although the situation probably was scary for Jayden, it is highly possible *Us Weekly* exaggerates it with the word “terror”. It is important to remember that at this point Jayden was less than two years old, so what he understood of the situation is debatable.

A comment from Spears’s aunt is added in the cover, saying “[Spears] needs to be on suicide watch”. Even though this part of the text makes it seem like Spears is a danger to herself, the photograph and description of the bathroom incident make it seem like Spears is a danger to others, too. She is depicted as a ticking time bomb, unpredictable and dangerous.

The word “dangerous” is used on a cover again, but this time it is about her “dangerous love with a married paparazzo”. At this point *Us Weekly* has questioned every romantic relationship Spears has had.



Figure 13: Us Weekly, February 18.

The February 18 cover (figure 13) is the first one that includes a styled photograph of Spears instead of a paparazzi shot. This could be because she is “locked in a psych ward” as the cover reads, thus it is not possible for the paparazzi to take photographs of her. Spears is shown with a sad expression on her face, looking straight at the camera. While most covers have been colorful, both the texts and photographs, the color scheme of the February 18 cover (figure 13) is very neutral. It is not sensational in the way, for example, the cover from March 5, 2007 (figure 7) is.

Spears is said to have “no one to trust as she loses control to parents she ‘hates’”. Because Spears was committed to a psychiatric ward, her father, Jamie Spears, petitioned for and was appointed conservatorship over his daughter, meaning that he was now in control of her finances (Deep Dive, 2020). Conservatorships are usually used for adults who cannot care for themselves (Deep Dive, 2020).

When talking about Spears losing her rights and all control to parents she ‘hates’, the apostrophes around the word “hates” makes it seem like juvenile hate, like a teenager whining about hating her parents. This juvenile hatred is further strengthened by using a photograph of Spears in which she looks to be younger than on the previous cover. The cover does not portray Spears as a 26-year-old mother of two, but as a much younger girl.

The next, and the last cover of 2008, follows the February 18 cover (figure 13) thematically. Again, a styled photograph of Spears is chosen on the cover. Although Spears's mental health issues have been discussed previously as shock material, this time the cover makes it seem serious with the "living with mental illness" headline. Her new "strict day-to-day life with Dad" is also mentioned, referring to the conservatorship. Spears is said to be "starting over with her boys – under close watch".

The photograph is a close-up of Spears's face and thus makes the cover seem more intimate. She is yet again shown with a serious expression on her face, further strengthening the seriousness of the issue. Like the February 18 cover (figure 13), the April 14 cover is not sensational but seems to approach Spears as a human. When comparing the April 14, 2008 cover to the March 5, 2007 (figure 7) there is a stark contrast. *Us Weekly* quickly went from exploiting Spears's struggles to portraying her in a serious manner.

Spears released her sixth studio album *Circus* in December 2008 (Deep Dive, 2020). The album's name has been speculated to refer to the media circus surrounding the star.

## 6. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the ways in which *Us Weekly* reports on Britney Spears through its covers and whether the tabloid's image of the celebrity changed over the three years that were in focus. Multimodal discourse analysis and feminist content analysis were used to examine the data that consisted of 26 covers from the years 2006-2008.

Similar to Wilson's (2010) findings on Angelina Jolie's changing image on tabloids, *Us Weekly*'s image of Spears changed throughout the years, at best even a couple of times in one year. In the beginning of 2006 Spears was seen as the head of her family, breaking the stereotype of the male counterpart being the head of the family. Spears was also said to be in charge financially. This did not, however, erase Spears's portrayal as a protective, warm motherly figure. Nevertheless, this image changed at the end of 2006 when *Us Weekly* started shifting the attention from her parenthood to her partying.

In 2007, due to her mental health struggles, Spears was depicted as an unpredictable and an unstable person. Her previous image as a protective parent was given to ex-husband Kevin Federline. Although Spears's struggles were exploited by *Us Weekly* in 2007, in 2008 the tabloid shifted its attitude and started showing Spears and her struggles in a more serious manner.

A recurring theme in many of the covers is Spears's motherhood. In the first covers examined in the study, Spears's children were used in her advantage, to make the readers sympathize with a struggling mother of two. In later covers, however, *Us Weekly* started to use Spears's children against her. Whenever the tabloid mentioned Spears going out with her friends or her sexual or romantic endeavors, her children were mentioned. The later covers thus used her children to make Spears seem like an irresponsible person. In addition to her motherhood being a big theme in the covers, her other relationships were widely discussed, too. All her relationships, from her friendship with fellow star Paris Hilton to her dating model Isaac Cohen, were questioned by the tabloid. This kind of questioning makes Spears look like she is lacking in some ways, as if she was not an adult capable of making her own decisions. It could be argued that at points, Spears was portrayed more as a child than a mother herself.

Like Wilson (2010) mentioned, rather than teaching the readers of today's tabloids on how to act like a star, these magazines do the opposite. *Us Weekly* is not telling the readers how to act like Spears, but how to not act like Spears. Spears's life is not shown to be something

desirable, but something that should be avoided. All her actions, from her parenting to her relationships, are brought forward to be judged by the readers of the tabloid.

The media has a lot of power over how celebrities are represented. Especially female celebrities are often criticized for things that male celebrities would not be criticized for. It could be argued that even if male celebrities receive criticism, they have a better chance of bouncing back and redeeming themselves. This can be seen in the present study, too.

Although at first Federline was made to look like a bad person with him making Spears cry, and possibly leeching off of her money, in the end he redeemed himself and became the sensible one in the tabloid's eyes. This kind of redeeming is not possible for all female celebrities, as Spears's struggles from over a decade ago are still highly associated with her even in 2020.

As the data set of this study was quite small, further research would be required to truly understand how the media portrayed Spears during these years – or to understand the power of the media in representing her and her life to the general public. This study examined only one tabloid's representation of one female celebrity, and it is possible that some of the covers from the time period examined in the study have not even been uploaded online. Further research could expand onto other celebrities, to the covers of different celebrity and entertainment magazines, or to the contents of *Us Weekly* and other magazines, to see whether the contents translate to the scandalous texts and imagery on the covers.

Although Spears has not released new music since 2016, she is still a popular and a well-known character. Recently Spears's name has been trending on social media sites, such as Twitter, with the hashtag *Free Britney*. The *#FreeBritney* movement aims to shed light on her current legal battle with the still ongoing conservatorship, and when doing so, also talks about the media's portrayal of the star. The vilification of Spears, especially due to her mental health struggles, is very apparent in the present study as well and needs to be highlighted.

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